



Religious Worlds of New York • Curriculum Development Project

What is Religion? Exploring Diverse Answers in Literature

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Abstract

This project asks students to reflect on the fundamental nature or meaning of religion, through group discussions of “religious moments” found in novels set in five different faith communities and traditions. It is an outside reading project designed for use in a 10th grade honors English class in a public school. The students at this school are ethnically and religiously homogenous for the most part (85% white, 80% Protestant) in a politically conservative, predominantly Christian, suburban community.

Stages of the Assignment

This is a group project done in two stages, with students working together in two different small groups. See below for sample student assignments with additional details.

First, students are divided into five small groups according to five major religious traditions: Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity. Students in each group will read a different novel set in their assigned religious tradition/community. Students will have two weeks to read the novel outside of class, and will then complete a work sheet (see below) to help them prepare to discuss their reading with their group. After the two weeks, they will meet together in their small group to discuss the novel according to what they’ve written.

Following the discussion day, students will break up into new “religiously diverse” small groups. Each of these small groups will contain at least one student from each of the former groups. So, in each group there would be a student who read the Buddhist novel, a student who read the Christian novel, a student who read the Hindu novel, and so on. In this small group, students will work together to design a presentation that includes references to the novels, and other media/sources, in order to answer the project’s essential question: *What is religion?*

Groups will have one week to prepare their presentations, and will present their work in class over the course of two periods. The following day we will read the book [*Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*](#) in class together, to sum up the themes of religious diversity, and students will write an in-class essay that utilizes all sources and discussions in order to answer the essential question.

Pedagogic Goals

In this project, students will engage with both fiction and nonfiction texts to examine the theme of religious diversity. Students will strengthen skills in short research, preparing for and engaging in small group discussions, and using text to support analysis of theme, plot, and characters. Students will also gain an understanding of diverse meanings/definitions of religion.

Relationship to the Broader Curriculum

This project will be the second of two outside reading projects. The first will examine ethnic diversity, and help students begin thinking about diversity in general. The second will explore religious diversity. This progression will allow students to be able to speak about diversity in respectful and academic terms *before* approaching religious diversity, and will set a precedent for how the course approaches reading outside of class, and group projects that are not a product of direct instruction.

Other Practical Details

Because we will have already had discussions about diversity, students will need to be reminded of these previous discussions. Because we are in a fairly conservative religious community, I will send a note home to parents to explain the project and its importance.

Common Core State Standards Addressed

- RL 2 Determine a theme or central idea of a text and analyze in detail its development over the course of the text, including how it emerges and is shaped and refined by specific details; provide an objective summary of the text.
- RL 6 Analyze a particular point of view or cultural experience reflected in a work of literature from outside the United States, drawing on a wide reading of world literature.
- RL 10 Read and comprehend literature at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.
- W 2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- W 7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- W 9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- W 10 Write routinely over extended time frames and shorter time frames for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.
- W 6 Use technology, including the Internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.
- SL 1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions with diverse partners on topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- SL 4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task.
- SL 5 Make strategic use of digital media in presentations to enhance understanding of findings, reasoning, and evidence and to add interest.
- SL 6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

Name: _____

Outside Reading #2
Theme: What is religion?

Overview:

There will be two stages to this project in which we will engage with the theme and specific standards. The first stage will have a short, individual written piece, the second stage will end in a group presentation, and the entire project will wrap up with a summative, in-class essay.

- Stage 1: Building expertise in a religious tradition through reading fiction and nonfiction
- Stage 2: Understanding religious and cultural diversity through comparison

Directions:

Stage 1:

1. We will divide up into small groups and each group will be assigned a religious tradition and a novel exploring that tradition. The reading list is as follows:
 - Buddhism: *Siddhartha*, by Herman Hesse
 - Islam: *Under the Persimmon Tree*, by Suzanne Fisher Staples
 - Hinduism: *The Mango Season*, by Amulya Malladi
 - Judaism: *Maus*, by Art Spiegelman
 - Christianity: *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, by James Baldwin
2. You will have two weeks to complete the novel before we reconvene in our religious traditions groups. Keep in mind that not only are you responsible to yourself for reading, you are also responsible to this group, and to a second group, who is assigned a different novel from a different faith tradition.
3. After reading, you will complete the attached sheet (Stage 1 Discussion Prep), in order to prepare you to discuss your novel with your small group. In order to answer questions on this sheet, you will need to do additional nonfiction research and reading.
4. At the end of the two weeks of reading time, you will meet in your small group to discuss what you have written on the attached sheet.

Stage 2:

1. The day after our small group discussion day that ends Stage 1, we will mix up the groups so that you are now in a small group with someone who read each of the other novels.
2. You will meet in those groups twice during class and as much as you want outside of class in order to prepare a group presentation that is outlined on the attached prompt sheet.
3. In one week's time, all groups will present in class.

We will have a cumulative assignment after all the presentations.

Stage 1 Discussion Prep

1. Select and describe a “religious moment” from the novel:

2. Attach a nonfiction article that helps explain that “religious moment” to the back of this sheet.

3. How does the nonfiction article you’ve attached help you understand the “religious moment” you selected from your novel?

4. How does the “religious moment” you selected affect your understanding of what religion is? What religious diversity is?

5. How does the religious theme of this novel affect your understanding of:

- the characters:

- the plot:

- other themes:

Stage 2: Group Presentation Prompt

What is religion? Use the novels and nonfiction sources from your previous discussions to explore the meaning/definition of the term “religion” through a group presentation with visual aids and media.

Guidelines:

- Presentations must be between 15 and 20 minutes in length.
- All members of your group must participate and speak in the presentation.

Summative Assessment

Using our discussion of *Old Turtle and the Broken Truth*, your fiction and nonfiction readings, and information you learned from your fellow students’ presentations, write an essay to answer our thematic question: ***What is religion?***